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Swan Lake

National Wildlife Refuge

Habitat Trail

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U. S. GO
DEPOSIT

Welcome! The Habitat Trail is a 3/4 mile, one-way loop which leads you to a greater understanding of the three elements of habitat, food, water, and cover.

The trail begins across the bridge south of the parking area and is well marked. Please continue walking straight until you reach sign post 1. All numbered posts correspond to the numbered sections of this leaflet.

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1. SWAN LAKE

Notice the sandy beach to your left. You are standing a few feet from the original shoreline of Swan Lake. No one living today remembers who first named this lake more than a century ago. Whistling swans are rare visitors now but old sources indicate they may have been more common in the past when this land was different.

Water is as important to wildlife as it is to you. Beginning in 1936, the Civilian Conservation Corps built dikes and levees which created Silver Lake and enlarged Swan Lake about four times to its present size. Water is the major attraction for the thousands of ducks and geese which use this refuge.

2. THE FOREST

Stand very still.
Feel the coolness of this place.
Listen to its sounds.

The forest provides living space and cover for many different animals. Cover is any place where fish and wildlife find shelter from the weather, escape from their enemies, or bear their young. Like water, it is a vital part of habitat.

Some of the trees in this forest were growing long before the refuge was established in 1937, but most of the forest is second-growth.

Walk quietly to the next point and you might see a white-tailed deer or some fox squirrels.

3. A WILDLIFE MENU

Food is the third and last essential element of habitat. You have already walked past strawberries, black raspberries, persimmons, and red mulberries.

Many animals live in one area all their lives. For it to be good habitat for them, food must be available year-round. The pecan to your left and pin oak to the right provide nuts and acorns or mast which is essential to many species during the winter. Mast from both trees is important winter food for deer, wood ducks, quail, turkeys, and squirrels. Corn, milo, and other crops are planted by refuge managers to provide food for Canada geese.

Even the fruit of poison ivy is consumed by bobwhites, brown thrashers, and at least a half-dozen other birds on the refuge. POISON IVY IS VERY COMMON IN THE FOREST AND YOU ARE CAUTIONED TO REMAIN ON THE TRAIL.

4. THE MARSH

Freshwater marshes are ever-changing worlds of plant and animal communities. They encourage wildlife diversity, naturally decontaminate polluted water, and store runoff to reduce the severity of floods.

Look for the light green "water lily" beyond the bulrushes in Swan Lake. It is really a lotus, one of only two lotus species in the world. The American lotus or yanquapin was planted extensively for food by the Omaha, Dakota, Pawnee, and Winnebago Indians. Muskrats, beavers, and some ducks also eat it to a limited extent but it is valued mostly for cover.

5. SUCCESSION

Succession is the naturally occurring process of one plant community changing to another. Tons of silt carried by streams from eroding farms as far away as Iowa are dumped here by annual floods, speeding natural succession on the refuge.

Swan Lake now averages only three feet deep. The invading black willows to your left are claiming the lake and geese no longer use this area. It will change to marsh and then to farmland or forest in your lifetime. Within a few decades, erosion and siltation will destroy most of the water habitat on the refuge.

You are standing on a trap site which was last used in 1968. Canada geese were lured here with corn to be captured, banded, and then released. The Dill-Thornsberry cannon net was invented on this refuge over 30 years ago and is now used by wildlife biologists throughout the world. It was set on the three stumps to your right.

6. UPLAND MANAGEMENT

The staked plot of land on your left was planted with blackberries, Japanese lespedeza, and five tree species. Those which survive the crucial first years will eventually provide good habitat for songbirds, quail, and other wildlife.

The trail runs parallel to a low hedge of light green Sericea lespedeza, a perennial which fixes nitrogen in the soil and resists soil erosion. It was introduced from the orient and provides good browse for white-tailed deer in Missouri. The seeds are an important winter food for bobwhite quail.

There are at least eight species of grass along

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this section of trail and the refuge once supported prairie chickens. But modern farming has destroyed their habitat on the land surrounding the refuge and they are now classified as rare in Missouri.

7. THE EDGE

As you walk down this section of trail, notice the line between forest and grassland. It is maintained by mowing. A mature hardwood forest produces mast for deer to eat during the fall and winter, but not enough sunlight enters to provide them sufficient browse during the spring and summer. Bobwhite quail are fond of lespedeza, but they use the forest for escape cover. Many wild animals prefer the borders or edges between one natural unit and another. Generally, land will support more kinds of wildlife if edge is provided.

As you walk about 100 yards further, note the grey-green stand of autumn olives which is encircled by a food plot planted with millet, milo, and soybeans. Autumn olive is an attractive ornamental which you might consider planting at home. Its abundant red fruits are eaten by 15 different species of birds.

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8. A HABITAT ISLAND

Here, at this last point, we have a naturally occurring "island" of prime habitat. Roughleaf dogwood, blackberry, wild grape, and black cherry provide food and cover for rabbits, squirrels, and at least a dozen songbirds.

The large tree in the middle is a sycamore. No other hardwood in this country attains a greater diameter and few are as tall. A local pioneer named Thomas Stanley lived in a huge hollow log of a fallen sycamore a few miles from here before building his trading post on the site of present-day Sumner in 1828.

This land was a wilderness then and knew the muffled tread of bears, the playful splash of otters, and the booming of prairie chickens. They are gone now but the refuge remains as an island of hope for the wildlife which remains.

This Habitat Trail was built by the Youth Conservation Corps. The YCC program provides summer employment for young men and women between the ages of 15 and 18 and accomplishes much needed work on public lands. It also endeavors to promote an understanding and appreciation for this nation's natural environment and heritage.

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